The Buddha and His Dhamma

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Abstract

In these two lectures, delivered to an audience with almost no prior knowledge of Buddhism, Ven. Bodhi gives a clear, concise account of the Buddha's life and teaching.

Buddhism originated with an Indian prince known as the Buddha, who taught in Northeast India in the fifth century BC. Two centuries later, with the support of the Emperor Asoka, Buddhism spread over the greater part of India and from there traveled the full breadth of the Asian continent. In several tidal waves of missionary zeal it rose up from its Indian homeland and inundated other regions, offering the peoples among whom it took root a solid foundation of faith and wisdom upon which to build their lives and a source of inspiration towards which to direct their hopes. At different points in history Buddhism has commanded followings in countries as diverse geographically, ethnically, and culturally as Afghanistan and Japan, Siberia and Cambodia, Korea and Sri Lanka; yet all have looked towards the same Indian sage as their master.

Though for historical reasons Buddhism eventually disappeared from India by about the twelfth century, before it vanished it had profoundly transformed Hinduism. In our own time Indian thinkers as different as Swami Vivekananda, Tagore, Gandhi, and Nehru have looked upon the Buddha as a model. In the twentieth century, too, while Buddhism has lost much of its following in the East, it has begun to have a growing impact on an increasing number of people in the West, and in its own quiet way it is sending down firm roots in several countries of the Western hemisphere.

In the course of its long history Buddhism has assumed a wide variety of forms. Because of its peaceful, non-dogmatic character, it has always adapted easily to the pre-existent cultures and religious practices of the people among whom it has spread, becoming in turn the fountainhead of a new culture and world view. So successful has Buddhism been in integrating itself with a country's indigenous culture that it is often difficult for us to discern the common thread that binds the different forms of Buddhism together as branches of the same religion. The outer surfaces differ so greatly: from the gentle, ceremonial Theravada Buddhism of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, to the contemplative and devotional practices of Far Eastern Mahayana Buddhism, to the mysterious ritualism of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism. Yet, though the outer faces of these Buddhist schools may differ drastically, they all remain rooted in a common source, the life and teaching of the man known to us as the Buddha.

Surprisingly, though the Buddha stands so far back from us in time, further back than all the later teachers who rose to eminence in the river of Buddhist history, it is still his voice that speaks to us most directly, in a language we can immediately understand, in words, images, and ideas to which we can immediately respond. If we place side by side the texts of the Chandogya Upanishad and the Buddha's Discourse on the Four Noble Truths, which are separated in time by perhaps only a hundred years, the former seems to come from a cultural and spiritual milieu so remote we can hardly comprehend it, while the latter sounds almost as if it had been spoken last week in Bombay, London, or New York. In attitude and perspective the Buddha comes so close to us it is hard to believe he is separated from us by a gulf of some 2,500 years.

That the Buddha's teaching should remain perennially relevant throughout the changing eras of human history, that his message should be undimmed by the sheer passage of time, is already implicit in the title by which he is most commonly known. For the word "Buddha," as is widely known, is not a proper name but an honorific title meaning "the Enlightened One," "the Awakened One." This title is given to him because he has woken up from the deep sleep of ignorance in which the rest of the world is absorbed; because he has penetrated the deepest truths about the human condition; and because he proclaims those truths with the aim of awakening others and enabling them to share his realization. Despite the shifting scenarios of history over twenty-five centuries, despite the change in world views and modes of thought from one epoch to the next, the basic truths of human life do not change. They remain constant, and are recognizable to those mature enough to reflect on them and intelligent enough to understand them. For this reason, even today in our age of jet travel, computer technology, and genetic engineering, it is perfectly fitting that the One who has Awakened should speak to us in words that are just as powerful, just as cogent, just as illuminating as they were when they were first proclaimed long ago in the towns and villages of Northeast India.

1 The Life of the Buddha

Although we cannot determine with absolute precision the dates of the Buddha's life, many scholars agree that he lived from approximately 563 to 483 BC; a growing number of scholars follow a different chronology which places the dates about eighty years later. As is natural with a spiritual leader who has made such a powerful impact on human civilization, the account of his life that has come down to us has been embroidered with myth and legend, which serve to bring before the mind's eye the loftiness of his spiritual stature. Nevertheless, in the oldest source on the Buddha's life, the Sutta Pitaka of the Pali Canon, we find a number of texts from which we can construct a fairly realistic picture of his career. What is striking about the picture given by these texts is that it shows the Buddha's life as a series of lessons which embody and convey the essential points of his teaching. Thus, in his own life, the person and the message merge together in an indissoluble union.

The future master was born into the Sakyan clan in a small republic nestled in the Himalayan foothills, in a region which at present lies in southern Nepal. His given name was Siddhattha (Skt: Siddhartha) and his family name Gotama (Gautama). Legend holds that he was the son of a powerful monarch, but in actuality the Sakyan state was an oligarchic republic, so his father was probably the chief of the ruling council of elders. By the Buddha's time the Sakyan state had become a tributary of the powerful state of Kosala, which corresponds to present-day Uttar Pradesh. Even the oldest suttas tell us that the infant's birth was attended by various wonders. Soon afterwards, a sage named Asita came to visit the baby, and recognizing on his body the marks of future greatness, he bowed down to the child in homage.

As a royal youth, Prince Siddhattha was raised in luxury. His father had built for him three palaces, one for each season of the year, and there he enjoyed himself in the company of his friends. At the age of sixteen he married his cousin, a beautiful princess named Yasodhara, and lived a contented life in the Sakyan capital, Kapilavatthu; during this time he was probably trained in the martial arts and the skills of statecraft.

As the years passed, however, when he reached his late twenties, the prince became increasingly introspective. What troubled him were the great burning issues we ordinarily take for granted — the questions concerning the purpose and meaning of our lives. Is the purpose of our existence the enjoyment of sensual pleasures, the achievement of wealth and status, the exercise of power? Or is there something beyond these, more real and fulfilling? These must have been the questions that rippled across his mind, for we find his own reflections recorded for us in a discourse called "The Noble Quest" (MN 26):

> Monks, before my enlightenment, being myself subject to birth, aging, sickness and death, to sorrow and defilement, I sought what was subject to birth, aging, sickness and death, to sorrow and defilement.
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> Then I considered thus: "Why, being subject to birth... to defilement, should I seek what is subject to birth... and defilement? Suppose that, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, I seek the unborn, the supreme security from bondage, Nibbana. Suppose that, being myself subject to aging, sickness and death, to sorrow and defilement, I seek the unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless and undefiled state, the supreme security from bondage, Nibbana."

Thus, at the age of 29, in the prime of life, with his parents weeping, he cut off his hair and beard, put on the saffron robes of a mendicant, and entered upon the homeless life of renunciation. The developed Buddha biography adds that he left the palace on the very day that his wife gave birth to their only child, the boy Rahula.

Having left behind his home and family, the Bodhisatta or "seeker of enlightenment" (as he is now called) headed south for Magadha (present-day Bihar), in whose environs small groups of seekers were quietly pursuing their quest for spiritual illumination, usually under the guidance of a guru. At the time northern India could boast of a number of accomplished masters famous for their philosophical systems and achievements in meditation. Prince Siddhattha sought out two of the most eminent, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. From them he learned systems of meditation which, from the descriptions in the texts, seem to have been forerunners of Raja Yoga. The Bodhisatta mastered their teachings and systems of meditation, but though he reached exalted levels of concentration (samadhi), he found these teachings insufficient, for they did not lead to the goal he was seeking: perfect enlightenment and the realization of Nibbana, release from the sufferings of sentient existence.

Having left his teachers, the Bodhisatta adopted a different path, one that was popular in ancient India and still has followers today: the path of asceticism, of self-mortification, pursued in the conviction that liberation is to be won by afflicting the body with pain beyond its normal levels of endurance. For six years the Bodhisatta followed this method with unyielding determination. He fasted for days on end until his body looked like a skeleton cloaked in skin; he exposed himself to the heat of the midday sun and the cold of the night; he subjected his flesh to such torments that he came almost to the door of death. Yet he found that despite his persistence and sincerity these austerities were futile. Later he would say that he took the path of self-mortification further

than all other ascetics, yet it led, not to higher wisdom and enlightenment, but only to physical weakness and the deterioration of his mental faculties.

Just then he thought of another path to enlightenment, one which balanced proper care of the body with sustained contemplation and deep investigation. He would later call this path "the middle way" because it avoids the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. He had experienced both extremes, the former as a prince and the latter as an ascetic, and he knew they were ultimately dead ends. To follow the middle way, however, he realized he would first have to regain his strength. Thus he gave up his practice of austerities and resumed taking nutritious food. At the time five other ascetics had been living in attendance on the Bodhisatta, hoping that when he attained enlightenment he would serve as their guide. But when they saw him partake of substantial meals, they became disgusted with him and left him, thinking the princely ascetic had given up his exertion and reverted to a life of luxury.

Now he was alone, and complete solitude allowed him to pursue his quest undisturbed. One day, when his physical strength had returned, he approached a lovely spot in Uruvela by the bank of the Nerañjara River. Here he prepared a seat of straw beneath an asvattha tree (later called the Bodhi Tree) and sat down cross-legged, making a firm resolution that he would never rise up from that seat until he had won his goal. As night descended he entered into deeper and deeper stages of meditation until his mind was perfectly calm and composed. Then, the records tell us, in the first watch of the night he directed his concentrated mind to the recollection of his previous lives. Gradually there unfolded before his inner vision his experiences in many past births, even during many cosmic aeons; in the middle watch of the night he developed the "divine eye" by which he could see beings passing away and taking rebirth in accordance with their karma, their deeds; and in the last watch of the night he penetrated the deepest truths of existence, the most basic laws of reality, and thereby removed from his mind the subtlest veils of ignorance. When dawn broke, the figure sitting beneath the tree was no longer a Bodhisatta, a seeker of enlightenment, but a Buddha, a Perfectly Enlightened One, one who had attained the Deathless in this very life itself.

For several weeks the newly awakened Buddha remained in the vicinity of the Bodhi Tree contemplating from different angles the Dhamma, the truth he had discovered. Then he came to a new crossroad in his spiritual career: Was he to teach, to try to share his realization with others, or should he instead remain quietly in the forest, enjoying the bliss of liberation alone?

At first his mind inclined to keeping quiet; for he thought the truth he had realized was just too deep for others to understand, too difficult to express in words, and he was concerned he would just weary himself trying to convey his realization to others. But now the texts introduce a dramatic element into the story. Just at the moment the Buddha decided to remain silent, a high deity named Brahma Sahampati, the Lord of a Thousand Worlds, realized that if the Master remained silent the world would be lost, deprived of the stainless path to deliverance from suffering. Therefore he descended to earth, bowed down low before the Enlightened One, and humbly pleaded with him to teach the Dhamma "for the sake of those with little dust in their eyes."

The Buddha then gazed out upon the world with his profound vision. He saw that people are like lotuses in a pond at different stages of growth, and he understood that just as some lotuses close to the surface of the water need only the sun's rays to rise above the surface and fully blossom, so there are some people who need only to hear the noble teaching to win enlightenment and gain perfect liberation of mind. When he saw this his heart was stirred by deep compassion, and he decided to go back into the world and to teach the Dhamma to those who were ready to listen.

The first ones he approached were his former companions, the five ascetics who had deserted him a few months earlier and were now dwelling in a deer park at Sarnath near Benares. He explained to them the truths he had discovered, and on hearing his discourse they gained insight into the Dhamma, becoming his first disciples. In the months ahead his following grew by leaps and bounds as both householders and ascetics heard the liberating message, gave up their former creeds, and declared themselves disciples of the Enlightened One.

Each year, even into his old age, he would wander among the villages, towns, and cities of the Ganges plain, teaching all who would lend an ear; he would rest only for the three months of the rainy season, and then resume his wanderings, which took him from present Delhi even as far east as Bengal. He established a Sangha, an order of monks and nuns, for which he laid down an intricate body of rules and regulations; this order still remains alive today, perhaps (along with the Jain order) the world's oldest continuous institution. He also attracted many lay followers who became devoted supporters of the Master and his Sangha

After an active ministry of forty-five years, at the ripe age of eighty, the Buddha headed for the northern town of Kusinara. There, surrounded by many disciples, he passed away into the "Nibbana element with no remainder of conditioned existence," severing forever his bondage to the round of rebirths.

I said earlier that each of the major events in the Buddha's life gives us a specific object lesson in his teaching. Now I want to draw out the lessons suggested by these events.

First, the Bodhisatta's awakening to the harsh realities of human existence — his discovery of our bondage to old age, illness, and death — teaches us the importance of deep reflection and critical thinking. His awakening reflects back to us the somnambulance in which we usually live, mired in our pleasures and petty concerns, oblivious to the "great affair" staring us in the face at every moment of our lives. His awakening reminds us

that we ourselves must emerge from the comfortable but dangerous cocoon of ignorance in which we have settled down; that we must break away from our thoughtless infatuation with our youth, health, and vitality; that we must rise to a new level of mature understanding which will enable us to triumph in our inevitable encounter with the Lord of Death.

The Bodhisatta's departure from the palace, his "great renunciation," teaches us a lesson in values. It shows us that from among the wide range of values which we can draw upon to give order to our lives, the quest for enlightenment and liberation should reign supreme. This goal ranks far above the pleasure, wealth, and power to which we ordinarily give priority, even above the call of social duty and mundane responsibilities. This does not mean, of course, that everyone who wants to follow the Buddha's path must be ready to leave behind home and family and adopt the lifestyle of a monk or nun. The Buddha's community of disciples included many householders as well as monks, devout laymen and laywomen who attained high levels of awakening while living active lives within the world. But the Buddha's example does show us that we must all order our values according to a scale which gives the highest place to the most worthy goal, to that which is also the most real of all realities, Nibbana; and we should never allow the claims of mundane obligations to pull us away from pursuing our aspiration.

Next, the Bodhisatta's six years of struggle shows us that the quest for the highest goal is a strenuous undertaking that calls for deep dedication and unrelenting effort. Fortunately for us, the Bodhisatta found that the practice of self-mortification is a fruitless exercise, and thus we need not follow him in this direction. But his uncompromising pursuit of truth underscores the degree of effort that the quest for enlightenment requires, and those who seek such a goal in full earnestness must be ready to submit to a difficult and demanding course of training.

The Buddha's enlightenment teaches us that ultimate wisdom and deliverance from suffering is a real potential inherent in human beings, one we can realize for ourselves without the aid or grace of an external savior. His enlightenment also highlights the ideal of sensible moderation, "the middle way," which has characterized Buddhism throughout its long history. The quest for truth may be a difficult undertaking, one which makes harsh demands on us, but it does not ask us to subject ourselves to penance and self-punishment. Final victory is to be won, not by tormenting the body, but by developing the mind, and this takes place through a course of training that balances care for the body with the cultivation of our higher spiritual faculties.

The decision the Buddha made after his enlightenment brings home another lesson to us. At this critical juncture, when he was faced with the choice of either keeping his enlightenment to himself or taking up the challenge of teaching others, the mandate of compassion prevailed in his heart. Leaving behind the quietude of the forest, he took upon himself the burden of guiding errant humanity along the path to liberation. This choice has had a tremendous impact on the subsequent development of Buddhism, for throughout its long history the spirit of compassion has been the heartbeat of the Buddha's dispensation, its innermost animating spirit. It was the Buddha's compassionate example that motivated Buddhist monks and nuns to travel across seas, mountains, and deserts, at the risk of their lives, to share the blessings of the Dhamma with those still lost in darkness. It is this example that inspires many Buddhists today, in a wide variety of ways, even when they can express their compassion only in humble acts of kindness and tender concern for those less fortunate than themselves.

Finally, the Buddha's passing away, his attainment of final Nibbana, teaches us once again that everything conditioned must perish, that all formations are impermanent, that even the greatest of spiritual masters is no exception to the very law he so often proclaimed. His passing away also teaches us that the highest bliss and peace comes only by relinquishing all, through the stilling of all conditioned things. For this is the final entrance way to the attainment of the unconditioned, the Deathless, Nibbana.

2 The Buddha's Mission

To ask why the Buddha's teaching proved so attractive and gained such a large following among all sectors of Northeast Indian society is to raise a question which is also relevant to us today. For we live at a time when Buddhism is exerting a strong appeal upon an increasing number of people, especially among those whose level of education and capacity for reflection has made them indifferent to the claims of revealed religion. I believe the remarkable success of Buddhism, as well as its contemporary appeal, can be understood principally in terms of two factors: one, the aim of the teaching; and the other, its methodological features.

2.1 The Aim of the Teaching

Unlike the so-called revealed religions, which rest upon faith in unverifiable doctrines, the Buddha formulated his teaching in a way that directly addresses the critical problem at the heart of human existence — the problem of suffering — and he promises that those who follow his teaching to its end will realize here and now the highest happiness and peace. All other concerns apart from this, such as theological dogmas, metaphysical subtleties,

rituals and rules of worship, the Buddha waves aside as irrelevant to the task at hand, the unraveling of the problem of suffering.

This pragmatic thrust of the Dhamma is clearly illustrated by an incident related in the texts. Once a monk named Malunkyaputta was pondering the great metaphysical questions — whether the world is eternal or non-eternal, infinite or finite, etc. — and he felt unhappy because the Buddha had refused to answer them. So one day Malunkyaputta went to the Master and told him, "Either you answer these questions for me or I leave the order."

The Buddha then told Malunkyaputta that the spiritual life did not depend on any answers to these questions, which were mere distractions from the real challenge of following the path. He then compared the metaphysician to a man struck by a poisoned arrow. When his relatives bring a surgeon, the man tells him, " I won't let you remove the arrow until you let me know the name of the man who struck me, the type of bow he used, the material from which the arrow was made, and the kind of poison he used." That man would die, the Buddha said, before the arrow was removed, and so too the metaphysician, struck with the arrow of suffering, will die without ever finding the path to freedom.

Not only does the Buddha make suffering and release from suffering the focus of his teaching, but he deals with the problem of suffering in a way that reveals an extraordinary degree of psychological insight. Like a psychoanalyst, the Buddha traces suffering to its roots within our minds, to our craving and clinging, and he holds that the cure, the solution to the problem of suffering, must also be achieved within our minds. To gain freedom from suffering it is futile to pray to the gods, to worship holy objects, to attach ourselves to rituals and ceremonies. Since suffering arises from our own mental defilements, we have to purify our minds of these defilements, from our greed, hatred, and ignorance, and this requires profound inner honesty.

While other religions lead us outward — towards ideas of a deity who determines our fate, or to lofty philosophical abstractions like the idea of a universal self or a nondual reality in which all opposites are resolved — the Buddha leads us back to ourselves, always keeping his teaching attuned to the hard facts of experience. He places the mind at the forefront of his analysis and says that it is the mind which fashions our actions, the mind which shapes our destiny, the mind which leads us towards misery or happiness. The beginning point of the teaching is the ordinary mind, in bondage and subject to suffering; the end point is the enlightened mind, completely purified and liberated from suffering. The whole teaching unfolds between these two points, taking the most direct route.

2.2 Characteristic Features of the Teaching

1. Self-reliance. This discussion of the aim of the Buddha's teaching leads us to the teaching's characteristic features. One of its most attractive features, closely related to its psychological orientation, is its emphasis on self-reliance. For the Buddha, the key to liberation is mental purity and correct understanding, and for this reason he rejects the notion that we can gain salvation by leaning on any external authority. He says: "By oneself is evil done, by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone, by oneself is one purified. Purity and defilement depend on oneself; no one can purify another" (Dhp 165).

This stress on human effort, on our capacity to liberate ourselves, is a distinctive feature of early Buddhism and offers a remarkable affirmation of the human potential. The Buddha does not claim any divine status for himself, nor does he assert that he is an agent of human salvation. He claims to be, not a personal savior, but a guide and teacher: "You yourselves must strive, the Buddha only points the way. Those who meditate and practice the path are freed from the bonds of death" (Dhp 276). Throughout his ministry he urged his disciples to "be islands to yourselves, be refuges to yourselves, without looking to any external refuge." Even on his deathbed he gave his followers this last piece of advice: "All conditioned things are subject to decay. Attain the goal by diligence."

2. Experiential Emphasis. Since wisdom or insight is the chief instrument of enlightenment, the Buddha always asked his disciples to follow him on the basis of their own understanding, not from obedience or unquestioning trust. He calls his Dhamma *ehipassiko*, which means "Come and see for yourself." He invites inquirers to investigate his teaching, to examine it in the light of their own reason and intelligence, and to gain confirmation of its truth for themselves. The Dhamma is said to be *paccattam veditabbo viññuhi*, "to be personally understood by the wise," and this requires intelligence and sustained inquiry.

Once the Buddha arrived at the town of a people called the Kalamas, who had been visited by many other ascetics. Each visiting teacher would praise his own doctrine to the sky and tear down the views of his rivals, and this left the Kalamas utterly confused. So when the Buddha arrived they came to him, explained their dilemma, and asked if he could offer some guidance.

The Buddha did not praise his own teaching and attack his rivals. Rather, he told them:

> It is right for you to doubt; doubt has arisen in you about dubious matters. Come, Kalamas, do not rely on oral tradition, or on the lineage of teachers, or on holy scriptures, or on abstract logic.

> Do not place blind trust in impressive personalities or in venerated gurus, but examine the issue for yourselves. When you know for yourselves that something is unwholesome and harmful, then you should reject it. And when you know for yourselves that something is wholesome and beneficial, then you should accept it and put it into practice.[AN 3.65]

3. Universality. Because the Buddha's teaching deals with the most universal of all human problems, the problem of suffering, he made his teaching a universal message, one which was addressed to all human beings solely by reason of their humanity. At the time the Buddha appeared on the Indian scene the higher religious teachings, recorded in the Vedas, were reserved for the brahmans, a privileged elite who performed sacrifices and rituals for others. Ordinary people were told to perform their duties in a spirit of humility in the hope that they might win a more fortunate rebirth and thus gain access to the sacred teachings. But the Buddha placed no restrictions on the people to whom he taught the Dhamma. He held that what made a person noble was his personal character and conduct, not his family and caste status. Thus he opened the doors of liberation to people of all social classes. Brahmans, kings and princes, merchants, farmers, workers, even outcasts — all were welcome to hear the Dhamma without discrimination, and many from the lower classes attained the highest stage of enlightenment.

Within the wider Indian society the Buddha did not attempt to abolish the caste system, which, it seems, had not yet developed into the complex, oppressive system it became several centuries later. However, he flatly rejected the orthodox brahman view that a person's class status was an indication of his intrinsic worth. Within the Sangha, the monastic order, he completely disregarded all distinctions of social class, declaring,

> Just as the waters of the four great rivers flow into the ocean and become known simply as the water of the ocean, so when people of all four social classes go forth as monks in my teaching, they give up their social status and become known simply as disciples of the Buddha.[Ud 5.5]

As part of his universalist project, the Buddha also threw open the doors of his teaching to women. Among the followers of Brahmanism, sacred teachings were the province of men. Women were to perform their domestic chores dutifully, to care for their husbands and in-laws, and to bear children, preferably sons. They were excluded from performing the Vedic rituals and even the teachings of the Upanishads were, with rare exceptions, the prerogative of men. The Buddha, in contrast, taught the Dhamma freely to both men and women. At first he hesitated to establish an order of nuns, since this would have been a radical step in his age; but once he agreed to create the order of nuns, women from all walks of life — princesses, housewives, daughters of good family, servant women, even former prostitutes — went forth into homelessness and attained the highest goal.

4. A Code of Ethics. One aspect of the Buddha's universalism deserves special mention: this is his conception of a universal code of ethics. It would be too extreme to say that the Buddha was the first religious teacher to formulate a moral code, for moral codes of different kinds had been laid down from the dawn of civilization. But it might not be farfetched to say that the Buddha was one of the very first teachers to separate out true moral principles from the complex fabric of social norms and communal customs with which they were generally interwoven.

With astute sophistication of thought, the Buddha provides for us an abstract principle to use as a guideline in determining the basic precepts of morality. This is the rule of "using oneself as a standard" (*attanam upamam katva*) for deciding how to treat others. From this abstract principle, he derives the four main precepts of his moral code: to abstain from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, and from lying. In the interest of personal welfare and communal harmony he adds a fifth: to abstain from intoxicants. Together, these give us the Five Precepts (*pañcasila*), the basic moral code of Buddhism.

The Buddha, however, did not regard morality merely as a set of rules based on reasoning. He taught that there is a universal law which connects our conduct with our personal destinies, ensuring that moral justice ultimately prevails in the world. This is the law of karma and its fruit, which holds that our intentional actions determine the type of rebirth we take and the diverse experiences we undergo in the course of our lives. This law is utterly impersonal in its operation. It gives no one preferential treatment; it recognizes no VIPs or favorites, but works with absolute uniformity towards all. Those who violate the laws of morality — whether they be high class or low class, rich or poor — acquire unwholesome karma and must suffer the consequences: a bad rebirth and future misery. Those who adhere to the moral rules, who engage in virtuous conduct, acquire wholesome karma leading to future benefits: a good rebirth, a happy life, and progress on the way to final liberation.

In conformity with the psychological orientation of his teaching, the Buddha gave special attention to the subjective springs of morality. He traces immoral behavior to three mental factors called the "three unwholesome roots" — greed, hatred, and delusion; and he traces ethical behavior to their opposites, the three wholesome roots — non-greed or generosity, non-hate or kindness, and non-delusion or wisdom. He also directs us to a more refined interior level of ethical purity to be achieved by developing, in meditation, four lofty attitudes called the "divine abodes" (*brahma-vihara*). These are loving-kindness (*metta*), the wish for the happiness and welfare of

all beings; compassion (*karuna*), the wish that all afflicted with suffering be freed from their suffering; altruistic joy (*mudita*), rejoicing in the happiness and success of others; and equanimity (*upekkha*), impartiality of mind. These four attitudes are to be developed universally, towards all beings without distinctions or discrimination.

Before I close there is one further feature of the Buddha's method that I want to mention. This is what might be called his "skill in means." Through his deep meditative attainments and his enlightened wisdom, the Buddha had the special ability to discover the precise way to teach the people who came to him for guidance. He could read deep into the hidden recesses of a person's heart, perceive that person's aptitudes and interests, and frame his teaching in the exact way needed to transform that person and lead him or her on to the path of freedom. The texts abound in many examples of this supreme pedagogic skill of the Buddha. Here I will relate just two famous instances.

The first is the case of Angulimala, a serial killer who lived in the forests of Kosala outside the capital Savatthi. Angulimala repeatedly attacked travelers, killed them, and cut off their fingers, which he wove into a necklace that he wore around his neck. He had killed hundreds of people and was feared throughout the kingdom. He was "wanted dead or alive," but no one had the courage to pursue him. The Buddha saw, however, with his supernormal vision, that Angulimala had another side to his character: as terrible as he was, he had the hidden potential to become an arahant, a saint. Thus one day, all alone, he headed out for the forest where Angulimala was dwelling.

When Angulimala saw him he thought, "Ah, now I will kill this ascetic and cut off his finger for my necklace." He started to run after him with his knife poised in the air. But no matter how fast he ran he could not reach him. For the Buddha, while walking along slowly, had performed a feat of psychic power such that Angulimala, running with all his might, could not catch up with him. Angulimala ran and ran but could not gain an inch. He then called out, "Stop, ascetic, stop!" The Buddha replied, "I have stopped, Angulimala, you stop too."

This statement had a deep impact on the criminal, an impact which struck down to the depths of his heart. He realized that the ascetic before him was the famous teacher, the Enlightened One, and he knew the Buddha had come to him out of compassion, to save him from his terrible deeds. He threw away his knife, bowed down at the Master's feet, and asked to be accepted as a monk. The Buddha admitted him into the order and after a short time Angulimala became an arahant, perfectly wise and deeply compassionate.

The second story concerns the woman Kisagotami. She was a poor woman who had married into a wealthy family, but she did not bear children and was thus scorned by her in-laws. This made her very miserable. But after some time she conceived and gave birth to a son, who became for her the source of boundless joy. Now that she had brought forth an heir to their wealth, everyone else in her husband's family too accepted her. But a few months after his birth the child died, and Kisagotami became distraught. She refused to believe the boy was dead, but convinced herself he was only ill. Thus she went around everywhere asking people to give her medicine for her son.

The townsfolk ridiculed her and abused her, calling her a mad woman, until she finally came into the presence of the Buddha. When she asked him for medicine, he did not give her an eloquent sermon on impermanence. He told her that he could indeed make some medicine for her son, but first she would have to bring him one ingredient: mustard seeds from a home where no one had ever died. Quite optimistic, she went from house to house, asking for mustard seeds. At each door people readily gave her seeds, but when she asked the donor whether anyone in that home had ever died, she was told, "Here a father has died, here a mother, here a wife, here a husband, a brother, a sister," and so on.

She thus came to see that death is the universal fate of all living beings, not a unique calamity that befell her own son. So she returned to the Buddha, aware now of the universal law of impermanence. When the Master saw her coming he asked her, "Did you bring the mustard seeds, Gotami?" And she replied: "Done, sir, is this business of the mustard seeds. Grant me a refuge." The Buddha had her ordained as a nun, and after some time she realized the highest goal and became one of the most eminent nuns in the Bhikkhuni Sangha or Order of Nuns.

To sum up, the Buddha's mission was to establish a path to spiritual perfection, to full enlightenment and Nibbana, liberation from suffering. He did this by propounding a teaching that acknowledged our capacity for attaining spiritual perfection yet which also remained fully respectful of the intelligence and autonomy of human beings. His approach was psychological in orientation, non-dogmatic, pragmatic, and open to investigation. He emphasized self-effort, moral rectitude, and personal responsibility, and he proclaimed his message universally, holding that the potential for spiritual growth and even for the highest enlightenment was accessible to anyone who makes the appropriate effort. It is these factors that give to the ancient teaching of the Buddha such a distinctly modern flavor, making it so relevant to us in these times of shifting ideas and changing values.

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